

Christians Get Failing Grade in Religious Knowledge

Dear Teacher,

In May and June 2010, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life conducted a religious-knowledge survey, testing Americans on the core teachings, history and leaders of the major world religions. The results, released in September, revealed that atheists and agnostics scored the highest, followed by Jews and Mormons. These groups outperformed evangelical Protestants, Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants. On average, Americans correctly answered 16 of the 32 religious-knowledge questions, which would be a failing grade on most examinations.

Knowledge about world religions is a critical factor in discussions of today's hot-button issues, ranging from use of the Bible in public schools to plans for a mosque and community center near Ground Zero in New York City. This installment of **The Wired Word** will focus on the importance of religious knowledge in our increasingly pluralistic nation, as Christians seek to gain a deeper understanding of their own faith and their neighbors' faiths.

Remember, if you wish to provide your class members with an abbreviated copy of the lesson, [click here](#), and you can send them a copy via e-mail today.

May God bless you as you teach the Scriptures this week.

The Editorial Team of **The Wired Word**



Christians Get Failing Grade in Religious Knowledge

The Wired Word for October 10, 2010

In the News

Do you know that Martin Luther inspired the Protestant Reformation? If not, you're in good company. More than half of Protestants surveyed by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life couldn't correctly identify Luther.

According to a recent survey, only 50 percent of Christians can name the four Gospels, and a mere 41 percent know that Job was the biblical figure who remained obedient to God despite suffering. Among Protestants, only 19 percent know that Protestants teach salvation through faith alone, while 13 percent associate Jonathan Edwards with the First Great Awakening. Roman Catholic Christians didn't fare much better: 45 percent of them didn't know that, according to church teaching, the bread and wine used in Holy Communion become the body and blood of Christ.

Christians' understanding of other religions is quite poor. Only 45 percent of Christians know that the Dalai Lama is Buddhist. Even fewer, 43 percent, are aware that the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday. A mere 24 percent of Christians can name the majority religion of Indonesia, the country with the world's largest population of Muslims. And when asked to identify the holy book of Islam, only half of Christians surveyed said the Quran.

These results are surprising, given the fact that the United States is one of the most religious countries in the

developed world, with six in 10 adults saying religion is "very important" in their lives. Even more shocking is the revelation that people without faith did the best on the survey: Atheists and agnostics scored the highest, with an average of 21 correct answers out of 32 questions. It may be that this group has accumulated better-than-average knowledge after years of debating religious issues with people of faith.

According to the survey, Jews and Mormons followed closely behind, with a score of 20. Next came Protestants, with an average of 16 correct answers, and Catholics, with a score of 15. People who said they attend religious services at least once a week and consider religion to be important in their lives often performed better on the survey, as did people with a higher level of education. But overall, Americans flunked this religious examination, with an average score of 50 percent.

"Americans are deeply religious," writes Clarence Page in the *Chicago Tribune*, "but we're also deeply ignorant about religion. The survey found, for example, that at least two-thirds knew that public school teachers are not allowed to lead the class in prayer, but fewer than a third knew that teachers can read from the Bible as an example of literature." In our schools today, opportunities are being lost to educate children about our nation's diverse cultures, beliefs, holy books and communities of faith. The fact is that religion can be taught in public schools, as long as teachers don't promote a particular religion.

This ignorance is bound to have consequences in a country currently embroiled in debates about plans for a mosque and community center near Ground Zero in New York City, and arguments about whether or not Jews are an "oppressed minority" (CNN's Rick Sanchez recently lost his job after speaking on this issue). When only about half of Americans know that the Quran is the Islamic holy book, it becomes difficult to have intelligent conversations about a pastor in Florida who recently threatened to burn the Quran.

Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Seminary, says meaningful dialogue between Christians and Muslims will be difficult to advance unless people master the basics of their own faith traditions and become at least familiar with the fundamentals of other religions. "Terminal niceness will not get us through this," he tells the *Christian Science Monitor*. "We need to deal with what's in the books."

Americans clearly suffer from a gap between faith and knowledge, and what we believe in our hearts doesn't always align with what we know in our heads. Having a personal relationship with Jesus is certainly central to the Christian faith, but this relationship will be shallow unless it's a connection to the distinctive Christ revealed by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It isn't enough to know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, as 71 percent of Americans do. We also need to know who Job was.

The challenge remains for Christians to improve their grades in religious knowledge, for the sake of both their own faith and their relationships with neighbors of other faiths. This can be done by including information about other faiths in church school classes, creating opportunities for interfaith dialogues and encouraging the teaching of comparative religion and the Bible as literature in public schools. As people of faith, we ought to know at least as much as the atheists and agnostics around us.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, *The Pew Forum*](#)

[Survey: Americans don't know much about religion, *Yahoo! News*](#)

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The Big Questions

1. What problems arise when a gap exists between religious faith and religious knowledge?
2. Christians in America are sometimes described as having a "religion of the heart," based on personal faith in Jesus Christ. Is this a fully formed Christian faith?
3. How can our public schools do a better job of teaching about world religions?
4. What role should congregations play in the education process, teaching their own faith as well as the faiths of others?
5. Do the specifics of our faith really matter? If so, what is the core knowledge that every Christian needs?

Confronting the News with Scripture

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

2 Chronicles 1:8-12

"Solomon said to God 'Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can rule this great people of yours?' God answered Solomon, 'Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked for possessions, wealth, honor, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked for long life, but have asked for wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may rule my people over whom I have made you king, wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. ...'" (For context, read 1:1-13.)

Solomon is anointed king of Israel and offers a thousand burnt offerings on the bronze altar at Gibeon. That night, God appears to Solomon and says to him, "Ask what I should give you." Instead of asking for possessions, wealth, honor, victory over enemies or even long life, Solomon asks for wisdom and knowledge. God grants his request and adds the gifts of riches, possessions and honor.

Question: How are wisdom and knowledge at the root of all God's other blessings?

Job 38:1-4

"Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ...'" (For context, read 38:1-41.)

After Job defends himself, saying he has done nothing to deserve his suffering, he asks God to answer him. The Lord speaks out of the whirlwind, asking if Job had been present at the dawn of creation. Job is humbled and satisfied, and says, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (42:1-2).

Questions: What are the limits of human knowledge? How do faith and wisdom complement each other?

Proverbs 1:7

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." (For context, read 1:1-7.)

The book of Proverbs, attributed to King Solomon, begins with a prologue about the importance of wisdom, instruction, righteousness, justice and shrewdness. Wisdom is understood to be a gift from God and a key to avoiding evil.

Questions: Where can knowledge be found today? How is it connected to respect for God and to a life of righteousness?

Mark 6:2

"On the sabbath [Jesus] began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!'" (For context, read 6:1-6.)

Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth and begins teaching in the synagogue. The people are shocked, unable to believe that a mere carpenter, the son of Mary, could have such wisdom and power. Jesus discovers that he can do no deeds of power there -- except to heal a few people -- and he is amazed at their unbelief.

Questions: How is knowledge often unsettling to people, especially in established communities? What can be done to lead people to new understandings?

Romans 15:14

"I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another." (For context, read 15:1-21.)

Paul concludes his letter to the Romans by encouraging them to build each other up, welcome one another and remember what he has taught them. He reminds readers of his mission to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ so that "those who have never heard of him shall understand" (15:21).

Questions: What is the relationship between goodness and knowledge? How can a life that contains both be a powerful witness to Jesus Christ?

Questions for Further Discussion

1. How does ignorance about religion influence and shape our political, national and global conversations?
2. Where are the challenges of making a connection between what we believe as Christians and what we know as thinking, educated adults?
3. What concrete steps can we take to increase our knowledge of religion, both our own and the faiths of others?
4. An early church father, Saint Anselm, is known for the motto "faith seeking understanding." What

does this phrase mean to you?

5. "If there is anything I have learned from liberals and conservatives," writes Christian author Shane Claiborne, "it's that you can have great answers and still be mean." How does right thinking connect to loving actions?

6. What programs and practices can deepen our understanding of Scripture and Christian history?

Responding to the News

Review your congregation's Christian education program, and discuss ways to improve it to increase knowledge of Christianity and the other great world religions.

Other News This Week

British biologist Robert Edwards has won the Nobel Prize in medicine for his development of *in vitro* fertilization, which led to the birth of the first "test-tube baby" in 1978. *In vitro* fertilization techniques have since led to the births of 4 million children. This creation and manipulation of human life was previously thought to be the work of God alone. What problems and possibilities accompany reproductive technology?

For more information, see:

[Robert Edwards wins 2010 Nobel Prize, *The Washington Post*](#)

Closing Prayer

Give us wisdom and knowledge, Lord, so we can better understand you, ourselves and our neighbors in this world of diverse faiths. May we remember that respect for you is the beginning of knowledge and that the combination of right thinking and loving actions can be a powerful witness to your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Knowledge about world religions is a critical factor in discussions of today's hot-button issues, ranging from use of the Bible in public schools to plans for a mosque and community center near Ground Zero in New York City. So this week's class will focus on the importance of religious knowledge in our increasingly pluralistic nation, as Christians seek to gain a deeper understanding of their own faith and their neighbors' faiths.

If you wish to start thinking about our topic in advance, below is some introductory material.



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Here are some of the questions we will discuss in class:

1. What problems arise when a gap exists between religious faith and religious knowledge?
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Confronting the News with Scripture

We will look at selected verses from these Scripture texts. You may wish to read these in advance for background:

2 Chronicles 1:1-13

Job 38:1-41

Proverbs 1:1-7

Mark 6:1-6

Romans 15:1-21

In class, we will talk about these passages and look for some insight on the big questions, as well as talk about other questions you may have about this topic. Please join us.

Scripture passages for Wired Word for October 10, 2010

2 Chronicles 1:1-13

¹Solomon son of David established himself in his kingdom; the Lord his God was with him and made him exceedingly great. ²Solomon summoned all Israel, the commanders of the thousands and of the hundreds, the judges, and all the leaders of all Israel, the heads of families. ³Then Solomon, and the whole assembly with him, went to the high place that was at Gibeon; for God's tent of meeting, which Moses the servant of the Lord had made in the wilderness, was there. ⁴(But David had brought the ark of God up from Kiriath-jearim to the place that David had prepared for it; for he had pitched a tent for it in Jerusalem.) ⁵Moreover the bronze altar that Bezalel son of Uri, son of Hur, had made, was there in front of the tabernacle of the Lord. And Solomon and the assembly inquired at it. ⁶Solomon went up there to the bronze altar before the Lord, which was at the tent of meeting, and offered a thousand burnt offerings on it. ⁷That night God appeared to Solomon, and said to him, "Ask what I should give you." ⁸Solomon said to God, "You have shown great and steadfast love to my father David, and have made me succeed him as king. ⁹O Lord God, let your promise to my father David now be fulfilled, for you have made me king over a people as numerous as the dust of the earth. ¹⁰Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can rule this great people of yours?" ¹¹God answered Solomon, "Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked for possessions, wealth, honor, or the life of those who hate you, and have not even asked for long life, but have asked for wisdom and knowledge for yourself that you may rule my people over whom I have made you king, ¹²wisdom and knowledge are granted to you. I will also give you riches, possessions, and honor, such as none of the kings had who were before you, and none after you shall have the like."

¹³So Solomon came from the high place at Gibeon, from the tent of meeting, to Jerusalem. And he reigned over Israel.

Job 38:1-41

³⁸Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ²"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

⁴"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ⁵Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? ⁸"Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— ⁹when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, ¹⁰and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, ¹¹and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped'?

¹²"Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, ¹³so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? ¹⁴It is changed

like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment. ¹⁵Light is withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken. ¹⁶“Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? ¹⁷Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? ¹⁸Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this. ¹⁹“Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness, ²⁰that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home? ²¹Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great! ²²“Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail, ²³which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war? ²⁴What is the way to the place where the light is distributed, or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?

²⁵“Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, ²⁶to bring rain on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life, ²⁷to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass? ²⁸“Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew? ²⁹From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven? ³⁰The waters become hard like stone, and the face of the deep is frozen. ³¹“Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the cords of Orion? ³²Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children? ³³Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth? ³⁴“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? ³⁵Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are’? ³⁶Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? ³⁷Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, ³⁸when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together? ³⁹“Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, ⁴⁰when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? ⁴¹Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?

Proverbs 1:1-7

1The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

²For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,

³for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;

⁴to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—

⁵let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,

⁶to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles. ⁷The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Mark 6:1-6

6He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his

hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."
⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching.

Romans 15:1-21

¹We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ²Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. ³For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." ⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; ¹⁰and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; ¹¹and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; ¹²and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁴I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another. ¹⁵Nevertheless on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God ¹⁶to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

¹⁷In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast of my work for God. ¹⁸For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, ¹⁹by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ. ²⁰Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, ²¹but as it is written, "Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand."



U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey

POLL September 28, 2010

Executive Summary

Atheists and agnostics, Jews and Mormons are among the highest-scoring groups on a new survey of religious knowledge, outperforming evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants and Catholics on questions about the core teachings, history and leading figures of major world religions.

On average, Americans correctly answer 16 of the 32 religious knowledge questions on the survey by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. Atheists and agnostics average 20.9 correct answers. Jews and Mormons do about as well, averaging 20.5 and 20.3 correct answers, respectively. Protestants as a whole average 16 correct answers; Catholics as a whole, 14.7. Atheists and agnostics, Jews and Mormons perform better than other groups on the survey even after controlling for differing levels of education.



Atheists and Agnostics, Mormons and Jews Score Best on Religious Knowledge Survey

Average # of questions answered correctly out of 32

Total	16.0
Atheist/Agnostic	20.9
Jewish	20.5
Mormon	20.3
White evangelical Protestant	17.6
White Catholic	16.0
White mainline Protestant	15.8
Nothing in particular	15.2
Black Protestant	13.4
Hispanic Catholic	11.6

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S
FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE May 19-June 6, 2010

On questions about Christianity – including a battery of questions about the Bible – Mormons (7.9 out of 12 right on average) and white evangelical Protestants (7.3 correct on average) show the highest levels of knowledge. Jews and atheists/agnostics stand out for their knowledge of other world religions, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism; out of 11 such questions on the survey, Jews answer 7.9 correctly (nearly three better than the national average) and atheists/agnostics answer 7.5 correctly (2.5 better than the national average). Atheists/agnostics and Jews also do particularly well on questions about the role of religion in public life, including a question about what the U.S. Constitution says about religion.

Religious Knowledge

QUIZ

How much do you know about religion?

And how do you compare with the average American? Take our short, 15-question [quiz](#) to find out.

Mormons and Evangelicals Know Most about Christianity; Atheists/Agnostics and Jews Do Best on World Religions

Average # of questions answered correctly about...

	Bible and Christianity (out of 12)	World religions (out of 11)	Religion in public life (out of 4)
Total	6.0	5.0	2.2
Christian	6.2	4.7	2.1
Protestant	6.5	4.6	2.1
White evangelical	7.3	4.8	2.3
White mainline	5.8	4.9	2.2
Black Protestant	5.9	3.9	1.7
Catholic	5.4	4.7	2.1
White Catholic	5.9	5.1	2.2
Hispanic Catholic	4.2	3.6	1.7
Mormon	7.9	5.6	2.3
Jewish	6.3	7.9	2.7
Unaffiliated	5.3	6.0	2.3
Atheist/Agnostic	6.7	7.5	2.8
Nothing in particular	4.9	5.4	2.1

The two highest scores in each category are shown in bold.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S FORUM
ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE May 19-June 6, 2010

These are among the key findings of the U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, a nationwide poll conducted from May 19 through June 6, 2010, among 3,412 Americans age 18 and older, on landlines and cell phones, in English and Spanish. Jews, Mormons and atheists/agnostics were oversampled to allow analysis of these relatively small groups.¹

[Previous surveys](#) by the Pew Research Center have shown that America is among the most religious of the world's developed nations. Nearly six-in-ten U.S. adults say that religion is "very important" in their lives, and roughly four-in-ten say they attend worship services at least once a week. But the U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey shows that large numbers of Americans are uninformed about the tenets, practices, history and leading figures of major faith traditions – including their own. Many people also think the constitutional restrictions on religion in public schools are stricter than they really are.

More than four-in-ten Catholics in the United States (45%) do not know that their church teaches that the bread and wine used in Communion do not merely symbolize but actually become the body and blood of Christ. About half of Protestants (53%) cannot correctly identify Martin Luther as the person whose writings and actions inspired the Protestant Reformation, which made their religion a separate branch of Christianity. Roughly four-in-ten Jews (43%) do not recognize that Maimonides, one of the most venerated rabbis in history, was Jewish.

In addition, fewer than half of Americans (47%) know that the Dalai Lama is Buddhist. Fewer than four-in-ten (38%) correctly associate Vishnu and Shiva with Hinduism. And only about a quarter of all Americans (27%) correctly answer that most people in Indonesia – the country with the [world's largest Muslim population](#) – are Muslims.

The survey also finds widespread confusion over the line between teaching and preaching in public schools. Out of a total of 41 knowledge questions (32 about religion and nine testing general knowledge) the single question that respondents most frequently get right is whether U.S. Supreme Court rulings allow teachers to lead public school classes in prayer. Nine-in-ten (89%) correctly say this is not allowed. But among the questions most often answered *incorrectly* is whether public school teachers are permitted to read from the Bible as an example of literature. Fully two-thirds of people surveyed (67%) also say "no" to this question, even though the Supreme Court has clearly stated that the Bible may be taught for its "literary and historic" qualities, as long as it is part of a secular curriculum.² On a third question along these lines, just 36% of the public knows that comparative religion classes may be taught in public schools. Together, this block of questions suggests that many Americans *think* the constitutional restrictions on religion in public schools are tighter than they really are.

What the Public Knows About Religion

At least two-thirds know...	
Public school teachers cannot lead class in prayer	89%
Atheist is someone who does not believe in God	85
Mother Teresa was Catholic	82
Moses was the Bible figure who led the exodus from Egypt	72
Jesus was born in Bethlehem	71
Constitution says government shall neither establish nor interfere with religion	68
Most people in Pakistan are Muslim	68
About half know...	
Golden rule is not one of Ten Commandments	55
Koran is the Islamic holy book	54
Ramadan is the Islamic holy month	52
Joseph Smith was Mormon	51
Dalai Lama is Buddhist	47
Martin Luther inspired Reformation	46
Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday	45
Four Gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke, John	45
Less than a third know...	
Most people in Indonesia are Muslim	27
Public school teachers can read from Bible	

Knowledge of Religion in Schools

% who know public school teachers...

CANNOT lead class in prayer	89%
CAN offer comparative religion course	36
CAN read from Bible as example of literature	23

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as example of literature	23
Only Protestants (not Catholics) traditionally teach salvation comes through faith alone	16
Jonathan Edwards participated in First Great Awakening	11
Maimonides was Jewish	8

See survey topline (Appendix B) for full question wording and results for all questions.

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On the other hand, most Americans are able to correctly answer at least half of the survey's questions about the Bible. For example, roughly seven-in-ten (71%) know that, according to the Bible, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. More than six-in-ten (63%) correctly name Genesis as the first book of the Bible. And more than half know that the Golden Rule – "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" – is *not* one of the Ten Commandments. On the full battery of seven questions about the Bible (five Old Testament and two New Testament items) Mormons do best, followed by white evangelical Protestants. Atheists/agnostics, black Protestants and Jews come next, all exhibiting greater knowledge of the Bible than white mainline Protestants and white Catholics, who in turn outscore those who describe their religion as nothing in particular.

Factors in Religious Knowledge

What factors seem to contribute to religious knowledge? Data from the survey indicate that educational attainment – how much schooling an individual has completed – is the single best predictor of religious knowledge. College graduates get nearly eight more questions right on average than do people with a high school education or less. Having taken a religion course in college is also strongly associated with higher religious knowledge.

Other factors linked with religious knowledge include reading Scripture at least once a week and talking about religion with friends and family. People who say they frequently talk about religion with friends and family get an average of roughly two more questions right than those who say they rarely or never discuss religion. People with the highest levels of religious commitment – those who say that they attend worship services at least once a week and that religion is very important in their lives – generally demonstrate higher levels of religious knowledge than those with medium or low religious commitment.³ Having regularly attended religious education classes or participated in a youth group as a child adds more than two questions to the average number answered correctly, compared with those who seldom or never participated in such activities. And those who attended private school score more than two questions better on average than those who attended public school when they were growing up. Interestingly, however, those who attended a private *religious* school score no better than those who attended a private *nonreligious* school.

This survey and previous [Pew Forum studies](#) have shown that Jews and atheists/agnostics have high levels of educational attainment on average, which partially explains their performance on the religious knowledge survey. However, *even after controlling for levels of education* and other key demographic traits (race, age, gender and region), significant differences in religious knowledge persist among adherents of various faith traditions. Atheists/agnostics, Jews and Mormons still have the highest levels of religious knowledge, followed by evangelical Protestants, then those whose religion is nothing in particular, mainline Protestants and Catholics. Atheists/agnostics and Jews stand out for high levels of knowledge about world religions other than Christianity, though they also score at or above the national average on questions about the Bible and Christianity. Holding demographic factors constant, evangelical Protestants outperform most groups (with the exceptions of Mormons and atheists/agnostics) on questions about the Bible and Christianity, but evangelicals fare less well compared with other groups on questions about world religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism. Mormons are the highest-scoring group on questions about the Bible.

When education and other demographic traits are held equal, whites score better than minorities on the survey's religious knowledge questions, men score somewhat better than women, and people outside the South score better than Southerners. The oldest group in the population (age 65 and older) gets fewer questions right than other age groups. However, people 65 and older do about as well as people under age 50 on questions about the Bible and Christianity; they do less well on questions about other world religions.

Other Findings

Other findings of the U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey include:

- On world religions other than Christianity, about six-in-ten Americans (62%) know that most people in India are Hindus. About half know that Ramadan is the Islamic holy month (52%) and can name the Koran as the Muslim holy book (54%). Roughly one-third (36%) correctly associate striving for nirvana with Buddhism.
- Around four-in-ten Americans know that the Mormon religion was founded sometime after 1800 (44%) and that the Book of Mormon tells the story of Jesus appearing to people in the Americas (40%). About half (51%) correctly identify Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as a Mormon.
- In addition to questions about religious knowledge, the survey included nine general knowledge questions (on history, politics, science and literature) for comparison purposes. These show, for example, that about six-in-ten Americans can name the vice president of the United States (59%) and understand that lasers do *not* work by focusing sound waves (60%). More than seven-in-ten (72%) correctly associate Susan B. Anthony with the movement to give women the right to vote, while just 42% know that Herman Melville was the author of the novel *Moby Dick*.

Education Linked With Greater Religious Knowledge

Average # of questions answered correctly out of 32

		Sample size
Total	16.0	3,412
College grad+	20.6	1,233
Some college	17.5	803
HS or less	12.8	1,353

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- Overall, people who score well on the general knowledge questions also tend to do well on the religion questions. Atheists/agnostics and Jews correctly answer an average of roughly seven of the nine general knowledge questions. Among the public overall, the average respondent correctly answers 5.2 of these general knowledge questions.
- While people with a high level of religious commitment do better than average on the religion questions, people with low levels of religious commitment do better than average on the general knowledge questions.
- Many Americans are devoted readers of Scripture: More than a third (37%) say they read the Bible or other Holy Scriptures at least once a week, not counting worship services. But Americans as a whole are much less inclined to read other books about religion. Nearly half of Americans who are affiliated with a religion (48%) say they “seldom” or “never” read books (other than Scripture) or visit websites about *their own* religion, and 70% say they seldom or never read books or visit websites about *other* religions.
- Mormons, black Protestants and white evangelicals are the most frequent readers of materials about religion. Fully half of all Mormons (51%) and roughly three-in-ten white evangelicals (30%) and black Protestants (29%) report that they read books or go online to learn about *their own* religion at least once a week. Only a small fraction of all religiously affiliated Americans – 6% of the general public and no more than 8% of any religious group – say they read books (other than Scripture) or visit websites to learn about religions *other than their own* at least once a week.

The remainder of this report is divided into two parts. Section II, “[Who Knows What About Religion](#),” focuses on differences between religious groups in eight domains of knowledge: the Bible, Elements of Christianity, Elements of Judaism, Elements of Mormonism, World Religions, Atheism and Agnosticism, the Role of Religion in Public Life, and Nonreligious Topics. Section III, “[Factors Linked With Religious Knowledge](#),” describes factors associated with religious knowledge. Details about the survey’s methodology are available in [Appendix A](#), and the full wording of all questions and topline survey results are provided in [Appendix B](#).

GOD IN AMERICA

This survey is being released at the God in America National Symposium on Religious Literacy on Sept. 28, 2010, in Washington, D.C. WGBH Television in Boston collaborated with the Pew Forum and the Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum on the symposium, which will also feature a screening of the three-part PBS documentary “[God in America](#).” The series interweaves documentary footage, historical dramatization and interviews to explore the historical role of religion in the U.S., including its impact on society, politics and culture.

Footnotes

1 The Pew Forum’s 2007 [U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#) estimated that Jews and Mormons each make up about 1.7% of the U.S. public, while atheists and agnostics combined account for about 4% of the U.S. population. Atheists and agnostics are treated as a single group throughout this report. The survey sample included too few interviews with atheists to analyze them separately. For more details on the sample sizes of religious groups, see [Appendix A](#). ([return to text](#))

2 Writing for the Supreme Court majority in its 1963 ruling in *Abington School District v. Schempp*, Justice Tom Clark made a case for the importance of the study of religion as the court clarified how public school teachers may go about it: “. . . [I]t might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.” ([return to text](#))

3 This may seem paradoxical, since atheists and agnostics have very low levels of religious commitment and yet score very well on the survey questions. However, atheists and agnostics account for a relatively small share of the total number of people with low levels of religious commitment; 4% of Americans describe themselves as atheists or agnostics, while fully 35% have low religious commitment. Atheists and agnostics answer an average of 20.9 questions correctly, compared with an average of 15.4 correct answers among people with low religious commitment who do *not* describe themselves as atheists or agnostics. ([return to text](#))

Photo credit: Eric Swanson/Corbis

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Survey: Americans don't know much about religion

 AP Associated Press

By RACHEL ZOLL, AP Religion Writer
Tue Sep 28, 3:42 pm ET

A new survey of Americans' knowledge of religion found that atheists, agnostics, Jews and Mormons outperformed Protestants and Roman Catholics in answering questions about major religions, while many respondents could not correctly give the most basic tenets of their own faiths.

Forty-five percent of Roman Catholics who participated in the study didn't know that, according to church teaching, the bread and wine used in Holy Communion is not just a symbol, but becomes the body and blood of Christ.

More than half of Protestants could not identify Martin Luther as the person who inspired the Protestant Reformation. And about four in 10 Jews did not know that Maimonides, one of the greatest rabbis and intellectuals in history, was Jewish.

[Related: [Texas resolution on Islam](#)]

The survey released Tuesday by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life aimed to test a broad range of religious knowledge, including understanding of the Bible, core teachings of different faiths and major figures in religious history. The U.S. is one of the most religious countries in the developed world, especially compared to largely secular Western Europe, but faith leaders and educators have long lamented that Americans still know relatively little about religion.

Respondents to the survey were asked 32 questions with a range of difficulty, including whether they could name the Islamic holy book and the first book of the Bible, or say what century the Mormon religion was founded. On average, participants in the survey answered correctly overall for half of the survey questions.

Atheists and agnostics scored highest, with an average of 21 correct answers, while Jews and Mormons followed with about 20 accurate responses. Protestants overall averaged 16 correct answers, while Catholics followed with a score of about 15.

Not surprisingly, those who said they attended worship at least once a week and considered religion important in their lives often performed better on the overall survey. However, level of education was the best predictor of religious knowledge. The top-performing groups on the survey still came out ahead even when controlling for how much schooling they had completed.

[Related: [Marriages in '09 at record low](#)]

On questions about Christianity, Mormons scored the highest, with an average of about eight correct answers out of 12, followed by white evangelicals, with an average of just over seven correct answers. Jews, along with atheists and agnostics, knew the most about other faiths, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism. Less than half of Americans know that the Dalai Lama is Buddhist, and less than four in 10 know that Vishnu and Shiva are part of Hinduism.

The study also found that many Americans don't understand constitutional restrictions on religion in public schools. While a majority know that public school teachers cannot lead classes in prayer, less than a quarter know that the U.S. Supreme Court has clearly stated that teachers can read from the Bible as an example of literature.

"Many Americans think the constitutional restrictions on religion in public schools are tighter than they really are," Pew researchers wrote.

The survey of 3,412 people, conducted between May and June of this year, had a margin of error of plus or minus 2.5 percentage points, while the margins of error for individual religious groups was higher.

Online:

Pew online quiz about religion: <http://features.pewforum.org/quiz/us-religious-knowledge>

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Religious ignorance hurts

September 29, 2010 | By Clarence Page

A new poll finds atheist and agnostics know more about religion than believers do. Maybe the pollsters weren't asking the right questions.

The study by the independent Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life asked 3,412 Americans 32 questions about the Bible and other world religions, historical figures and constitutional principles.

Americans are deeply religious, the study confirms, but we're also deeply ignorant about religion. The survey found, for example, that at least two-thirds knew that public school teachers are not allowed to lead the class in prayer, but fewer than a third knew that teachers can read from the Bible as an example of literature.

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No wonder there's so much ignorance about religion. It's constitutionally permissible to teach about religion, as long as you don't try to promote a particular religion. Unfortunately a lot of teachers and principals have decided that in today's litigious society, it is not worth the hassle to do either.

Who can blame them, considering lawsuits like the recent action taken by a group of suburban Boston middle-school parents. They sued after some sixth-grade boys decided to take part in a prayer at a Boston mosque during a field trip in May. What gets me is that a lawyer for the parents charged that the trip would have been unconstitutional even if none of the kids had prayed.

That's a loss for the kids. America's diversity has a lot to teach us. My earliest knowledge of other people's religions came from field trips to churches and synagogues under the auspices of our public schools. Today's attitudes have swung too often, in my view, from neutrality toward religion to being anti-religious. Lost in that swing is a lot of valuable knowledge about this nation's diverse people, cultures, histories and beliefs.

Ironically, the least ignorant group by a narrow margin in the Pew poll were atheists and agnostics. Grouped together, they answered an average of 20.9 percent of the questions correctly, narrowly beating Jews (20.5) and Mormons (20.3), the two highest-scoring groups of believers.

Does increased knowledge ironically lead to a loss of religious faith? I am reminded of a bumper sticker I've seen: "Know Jesus, Know Peace." A nonbeliever's version might read, "Know Religion, No Religion!"

"I gave a Bible to my daughter," said Dave Silverman, president of American Atheists. "That's how you make atheists."

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Yet, in my experience, atheists are vastly outnumbered among nonbelievers by agnostics, whose bumper stickers might read, "Honk If You're Not Sure."

Clustered in the middle were white Evangelical Protestants (17.6 percent), white Catholics (16 percent), white mainline Protestants (15.8) and "Nothing in particular" (15.2 percent).

I don't know how people draw a line of difference between the "Nothing-in-particulars" and the all-out agnostics, except that agnostics may have made more of a deliberate choice to stay uncommitted.

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But what really dropped my jaw with surprise were the two lowest-performing groups: Black Protestants (13.4 percent) and Hispanic Catholic (11.6 percent).

What? Having grown up in the black church since before I could walk, I think maybe the pollsters were asking the wrong questions.

I would not be surprised, for example, if quite a few black folks thought "Martin Luther" was a reference to a great American civil rights leader, not the German priest and professor who initiated the Protestant Reformation.

And I didn't learn until I went to college that the Dalai Lama is Buddhist, that Jonathan Edwards participated in the Great Awakening, that Maimonides was a great Jewish leader. Fewer than a third of the people polled by Pew got those last two right.

Maybe black church products like me would have scored better with questions like this:

1. How is Thomas A. Dorsey most often remembered by cultural historians?
2. What do the initials in the A.M.E. Church stand for?
3. What is America's largest black religious denomination?
4. What do these "Negro spirituals" have in common: "Steal Away," "Wade in the Water" and "Follow the Drinking Gourd."

ANSWERS:

- 1.The father of gospel music.
- 2.African Methodist Episcopal.
- 3.The National Baptist Convention, USA Inc.
- 4.Their lyrics provided coded escape instructions for slaves in the South. (The "drinking gourd" is the constellation that contains the North Star.)

Little factoids like that are why I think education about religion is a good idea. We understand Americans better when we understand what Americans believe — and why.

Clarence Page is a member of the Tribune's editorial board and blogs at chicagotribune.com/pagespage

cpage@tribune.com

What Rick Sanchez said about CNN and Jews

The Web is burning up with [this comment](#) that CNN's Rick Sanchez made on a radio show, which seems like he's saying CNN and the networks are run by Jews:

I'm telling you that everybody who runs CNN is a lot like Stewart, and a lot of people who run all the other networks are a lot like Stewart. And to imply that somehow they -- the people in this country who are Jewish -- are an oppressed minority? *Yeah.*

If Sanchez meant that everybody who runs the networks is a lot like Stewart in that they're Jewish, that's obviously very, very bad, and portends serious trouble for him. I wonder, though, if that's what he really meant. Here's the full context of what Sanchez said about Stewart -- most of his complaint is directed at white liberals who, Sanchez complains, don't understand minorities despite their best intentions:

SANCHEZ: He is one of the left wing elite northeast establishment guys who says, I like black people and Mexicans as long as they're, "here, let me tap you on the head. Way to go, Ricky, you're doing a good job." But as soon as you do or say something or develop any kind of character, they push you down. Just like the administrator who said he didn't want me to be an anchor, he wanted me to be a reporter, because when he looks at me he thinks of other Hispanic reporters like John Quinones.

QUESTIONER: Do you think that's a conscious thing, that Stewart or left wing liberals or whatever do?

SANCHEZ: No, I don't.

QUESTIONER: Because he's on the same side as you on immigration.

SANCHEZ: I don't think it's a conscious thing. I just think it's important that people who are not minorities understand that those of us who are -- and very few of us will say the things that I just said -- are actually more complex than they think we are.

QUESTIONER: Stewart's a minority as much as you are. He's Jewish.

SANCHEZ: Yeah. Yeah. Very powerless people. Please. What are you, kidding?

QUESTIONER: You're telling me that --

SANCHEZ: I'm telling you that everybody who runs CNN is a lot like Stewart, and a lot of people who run all the other networks are a lot like Stewart. And to imply that somehow they -- the people in this country who are Jewish -- are an oppressed minority? *Yeah.*

It's not quite clear what Sanchez means here. Again: If he was referring derisively to the people who run all the networks as Jewish, that's obviously awful. But reading the full context, it seems at least possible that when he referred to Stewart and the people at the networks he was referring not to Jews, but to snooty white liberal elites who don't understand minorities. After all, that's who he'd been talking about during the bulk of the whole exchange.

The problem for Sanchez is that even if that were what he meant, he said it just before his sneering dismissal of the idea that Jews are an oppressed minority. So even if he did mean to say what I suggested above, it may be tough for him to get his clarification taken seriously.

On the other hand, Sanchez very well could have meant his comments in the way that the worst possible interpretation suggests.

UPDATE, 3:04 p.m.: Let me try to be a bit clearer. The charitable interpretation of what he said -- and I mean *charitable* -- is that Sanchez's mind was on the white liberals he'd been ranting about. In the first half of the offending quote he was referring to them:

I'm telling you that everybody who runs CNN is a lot like Stewart, and a lot of people who run all the other networks are a lot like Stewart.

Then, in the second half, he addressed what his questioner had said about Jews:

And to imply that somehow they -- the people in this country who are Jewish -- are an oppressed minority? Yeah.

The problem is that even if he meant these comments in the less offensive way, he used the word "they" in that second half *before* saying "the people in this country who are Jewish." This will be impossible for him to clarify. And, again, he very well have meant the comments in the worst way.

UPDATE, 6:23 p.m.: CNN [fires Sanchez in a terse, two-sentence statement.](#)

The Christian Science Monitor - CSMonitor.com

In US, atheists know religion better than believers. Is that bad?

A new study shows that many devout Americans know less about religion than do atheists. To some observers, it suggests a shallowness of faith. To others, it is evidence that Americans know the spirit better than the letter of religion.



Pope Benedict XVI gives communion to a youth as he conducts Mass in Westminster Cathedral in London on Sept. 18. A study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that nearly half of American Catholics didn't know that, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, the sacramental bread and wine literally become Christ's body and blood.

(Kirsty Wigglesworth/AP)

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Correspondent

posted September 28, 2010 at 8:09 pm EDT

For a highly religious people, Americans have plenty of room to improve their knowledge of religion, according to a new survey that's stirring debate about the health of faith in America.

The US Religious Knowledge Survey, released Tuesday from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, found atheists and agnostics know more basic facts about the Bible than either Protestants or Catholics. Among the other findings:

- 57 percent of Protestants can name the Bible's four gospels.
- 55 percent of Catholics know their tradition teaches that sacramental bread and wine become Christ's body and blood.
- 15 percent of white evangelicals know Jonathan Edwards participated in the First Great Awakening.

Take Pew's religious quiz: Are you smarter than an atheist?

Based on a May-June survey of more than 3,400 American adults, these findings point to a dearth of religious knowledge in a country where nearly 6 in 10 adults say religion is "very important" in their lives.

"If you can't even name the four books that tell us about [Jesus'] teachings and way of life, then you're in big trouble," said Fuller Seminary President Richard Mouw. "You don't know who Jesus is if you don't even know Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John."

Not all Christian educators are worried, however. Wilhelmina Jenkins, an Atlanta physicist, says people are hungry for knowledge of history and other religions in the adult Bible study class she leads at the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation in Atlanta. She says facts are helpful, but "academic" questions – such as those asked in the Pew survey – don't reveal much about a person's understanding of his/her faith tradition.

"I don't think this [survey] got to the heart of what most people know about their own religious experience," Ms. Jenkins said. "It was a very academic view of religion. [But] If you asked people, 'What's the fundamental bottom line in Christianity?' Most people would tell you, 'Jesus said to love God and love your neighbor.' I don't think most people would have any trouble knowing that."

This Pew survey comes as Americans consider questions of religious identity and religious freedom in light of a proposed mosque near ground zero in Manhattan. Mr. Mouw argues that meaningful dialogue between Christians and Muslims will prove elusive, despite good intentions, unless people come to master the basics of their own faith traditions – and become at least familiar with the other's.

"Terminal niceness will not get us through this," said Mouw, author of "Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World." "We need to deal with what's in the books."

Other scholars, however, aren't convinced that knowledge of religious traditions is essential to building interfaith bridges. While such information is helpful, it's not as key a factor in fostering tolerant views as having a close personal connection with someone of a different faith, according to David Campbell, co-author of "American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us."

Whatever the implications, the survey highlights how Americans often don't feel tightly bound by one religious tradition or another as they carve out their own belief systems. While Mouw sees this giving rise to "vague spirituality," others fear that faith practitioners might lose respect if lack of knowledge comes to be seen as lack of seriousness about religion.

"Your knowledge of something tells you how seriously you take it," said Alan Wolfe, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. "If a person is devout, then I ought to respect that devotion and not mock it, to take it seriously. But if the knowledge base of that devotion is as shallow as it seems, then is the respect earned?"

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